CIA Denounces Allegations of Coverup in Gas Attacks

11/2/96

By Bill McAllister and Dana Priest
Washington Post Staff Writers

The CIA held a rare on-the-record news conference yesterday to denounce as untrue two former employees' allegations that the agency covered up Iraqi poison gas attacks and other cases where U.S. troops were exposed to chemical weapons during the Gulf War.

"We have held nothing back," Nora Slatkin, the CIA's executive director, told reporters summoned to a small, crowded theater at the agency's Langley headquarters.

But Slatkin, who manages the agency's day-to-day operations, announced that the CIA's inspector general had been directed to examine the former workers' allegations, including their complaint that they suffered discrimination in their jobs as a result of their charges.

The fact that the secretive agency went to such public efforts to deny the charges by the husband-and-wife team of former analysts Patrick and Robin Eddington of Fairfax illustrates the CIA's sensitivity to the couple's charges, which were first aired Wednesday in the New York Times. In that interview, Patrick Eddington alleged that there were 60 incidents in which nerve gases and other chemical weapons were released near U.S. troops.

Yesterday, Eddington told an interviewer on the cable MSNBC news network he believed that in "8, 10, 12 incidents" U.S. forces came directly under chemical attack by Iraqi forces during the brief 1991 war.

Like the CIA, the Pentagon and an independent presidential committee have rejected those allegations, saying they have examined the same data cited by the Eddingtons and found that it falls short of confirming such suspicions.

"On the basis of a comprehensive review of intelligence, we continue to conclude that Iraq did not use chemical or biological weapons during the Gulf War," Slatkin said yesterday. The CIA official also rejected Patrick Eddington's suggestions that fallout from aerial bombing of Iraqi chemical plants could have reached U.S. troops.

She said that a CIA analyst, Larry Fox, discovered the first evidence that U.S. troops could have been exposed to some chemical fallout as they were exploding a cache of Iraqi munitions at a remote desert site after the war. The Pentagon has cited that disclosure as a "watershed" event and has ordered 20,000 troops who were in the area to be contacted to determine if their health was affected.

Slatkin said Fox was washing dishes at his home, listening to a Baltimore radio talk show as he heard Gulf veterans discuss explosions at the site. The analyst later returned to Langley and reviewed a tape of the broadcast, discovering that U.S. troops were at a place called Khamisiyah, where he knew chemical weapons might have been present and thus released when Iraqi munitions were blown up following the war.

Patrick Eddington's lawyer, Mark Zaid, said yesterday evening that the CIA's news conference was "just a public relations tool" and that his client demands a congressional investigation.

Patrick Eddington, who is planning to publish a book with his conclusions on the Gulf War, was asked in the MSNBC interview if there was a "smoking gun" in the nearly 60 classified documents that he and his wife contend show evidence of use of chemical weapons in the war zone. He replied, "That depends on what you mean by a smoking gun."

"When you take that raw data and marry it up with what we have in terms of eyewitness testimony—American soldiers and chemical specialists who were on the ground through the war—you get a very conclusive picture," he said. "Quite frankly, I don't know how anyone can make the claim an Iraqi prisoner of war who has just told you that chemical munitions were with his unit and then you turn around and get evidence for your own soldiers on the ground that, yes, we found chemical munitions in a particular area. To me that's conclusive. It's there."

Slatkin said all of the documents cited by the Eddingtons have been provided to a White House panel that is reviewing the illnesses of Persian Gulf soldiers and said the CIA was reviewing others with an eye to posting them on an Internet site.

In October 1995, Patrick Eddington spoke with and gave his findings and documents to the independent Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illness. Gary Caruso, spokesman for the panel, said the data did not show evidence of chemical exposure. "There would have to be more information to back up that claim," he said. Caruso describe the documents as "raw intelligence data with [Eddington's] own interpretation and analysis."

"They are not being suppressed by the CIA," said Caruso, whose panel has been somewhat critical in the past of both CIA and Pentagon handling of the issue of illnesses reported among Gulf War veterans. "Pat Eddington was working off the same CIA databases we have access to."

Zaid, Eddington's lawyer, said Thursday that Eddington was too busy for an interview "because it's been so crazy here." Zaid quoted Eddington as saying that the commission did not have access to all his documents because some of them were marked top secret and panel members were not allowed to read data at such a high clearance level.

Caruso said instead that certain members of the panel have clearance to read top secret papers.

The CIA frequently holds background sessions in which reporters are briefed about conditions overseas, but rarely does the agency conduct public news conferences at which its officials can be televised and quoted by name. Spokesmen said the agency previously had held one such conference since John Deutch arrived as CIA director in 1995, and they said they could not recall the agency holding a conference to publicly denounce two of its former employees.